

Stephen J. Castro calls for a wider debate about indiscriminately applied breathing techniques that appear to alter states of consciousness.

## New Age Therapy - higher consciousness or delusion? —

**I** AM NOT a therapist but I happened to read the recent *Daily Mail* feature on psychotherapy and was impressed by the sanity of statements reported from Ivan Tyrrell, one of the editors of *The Therapist*. Living as I do on the fringe of Britain's largest New Age Community located on the north east coast of Scotland, namely, the Findhorn Foundation, a sane, rational voice on some of the controversial issues in psychotherapy was a welcome alternative to the totemic jargon from adherents of the various New Age therapy cults rife in these parts. In fact, if you have ever experienced (and it is indeed a quite unforgettable experience) someone go berserk and beat a cushion in order to express "repressed" anger, edged on by a group of onlookers displaying the fervour of a mindless mob, you tend to value rationality, and not gestalt. It was therefore heartening to read in the *Daily Mail* that "there are more than 400 published studies that show quite clearly that when people are focused in this way, they just become more angry - not better."

This article concerns a controversy that caused quite a stir here in the small Scottish town of Forres, this being a "transpersonal" therapy known as 'Holotropic Breathwork™', which at the time was being introduced into this country by the Foundation, a charitable educational trust. The therapy was commercially presented to Everyman as "ideally suited for those seeking greater psychological opening as well as an expanded mystical and spiritual dimension in their lives." As I desire some further research material on hyperventilation - the principal methodology employed by this therapy - I hope for a response to this article from professional therapists.

Due to the often overlooked factor of the sociological influence that therapies and therapists now have upon contemporary society and social trends, I feel that the issue of Holotropic Breathwork™ could serve to stimulate debate. After all, in the West, and particularly within the New Age counter-culture, therapy is becoming seen by many as a "spiritual path," and the therapist is replacing the image of the Eastern guru as one who is supposedly able to facilitate spiritual growth and experiences.

Holotropic Breathwork™ is promoted by Grof Transpersonal Training, Inc. Its founder, Stanislav Grof, M.D., had emigrated from Czechoslovakia to the USA in 1967. A researcher into the clinical effects and possible psychiatric use of LSD, he was invited to undertake U.S. government funded research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Centre, and was at one

time assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University. However, within a decade (1973) Dr. Grof had turned away from clinical research (LSD was now a controversial issue) and became "scholar-in-residence" at the Esalen Institute of California, a New Age therapy centre, where he had already achieved celebrity status due to his experiential interest in psychedelics, non-conventional psycho-therapy, and altered states of consciousness (ASC's). In 1976, Dr. Grof and his wife Christina, a former devotee of the controversial Indian guru Swami Muktananda,<sup>1</sup> developed the practice of Holotropic Breathwork™, a "non-pharmacological" technique, which, "although not as profound as high dose LSD or psilocybin, provides access to similar experiential territories."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of holotropic breathwork therapy is to act as an amplifier or catalyst of biochemical and physiological processes in the brain: Dr. Grof states, "It seems that the non-ordinary states of consciousness induced by holotropic breathing is associated with biochemical changes in the brain that make it possible for the contents of the unconscious

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to surface."<sup>3</sup> The methodology of Holotropic Breathwork involves extensive periods of hyperventilation, and the "already powerful effect of hyperventilation is further enhanced by the use of evocative music and other sound technology ... these two methods potentiate each other to what is undoubtedly the most dramatic means of changing consciousness with the exception of psychedelic drugs."<sup>4</sup>

In 1990, The Director of the Findhorn Foundation announced in the members' internal magazine that the Foundation was considering a three-year training programme for Holotropic Breathwork™. My concerns about the introduction and inevitable spread of holotropic breathing had arisen from alarming reports of disoriented participants who had emerged "high" or distressed from the sessions, my reading of Dr. Grof's books, and the commercial nature of the therapy in question. As one Foundation staff member and breathwork supporter succinctly expressed it, "... the income out of the training programme itself is only one aspect. We also need to consider that we are qualifying people to give workshops in a realm which opens up a deep inner spiritual knowing and which can provide a good income on top of it, and that we can potentially earn substantial sums by hosting workshops for the public in the future."<sup>5</sup> In an attempt to initiate dialogue, I, and another, wrote open letters to the Foundation membership. I had no medical background, nor was I claiming any spiritual status,

but reading information from more learned sources enabled me to formulate what I hoped was a common-sense argument against the indiscriminate commercial employment of the technique of holotropic breathing in the name of "spirituality":

"Any active jogger in the community will no doubt be aware of what is termed 'runner's high' - that moment of euphoria and well-being sometimes experienced after pushing the body to its limits. The 'high' is due to cerebral hypoxia: the reduction of oxygen transmitted to the cortex of the brain. Very few objectively-minded persons encountering such a state would deem it 'spiritual,' and quite rightly so. It is a physiological response of the brain triggered by bodily stress and oxygen deprivation. Endogenous opioid peptides, such as endorphins and enkephalins - morphine-like chemicals - are secreted by certain brain cells to alleviate the organism's distress.

"Holotropic Breathwork induces an abnormal degree of cerebral hypoxia, which is known to give rise to seizure activity in the brain's limbic system. This will affect lobal areas of the brain associated with memory and emotion. The symptoms of limbic lobe agitation include: depersonalization, involuntary memory recall, intense emotion, euphoria, auditory and visual hallucinations. All of which are known to arise through prolonged holotropic breathing.

"The use of rhythmic breathing, music, dance, ritual, hallucinogenics, narrative, emotional arousal, sex, physical exertion etc., have been applied in one form or another throughout all Ages and ethnic cultures to induce altered states of consciousness. Legitimate traditions warn against any practice employed in an *ad hoc* manner upon a random collection of people at differing stages of evolutionary growth and needs. Such techniques will merely produce counterfeit experiences - not spirituality - and can be seriously damaging to the developmental potential of the participants..."<sup>6</sup>

In response, a partisan of the breathwork sought to reassure me that "Holotropic Breathwork™ has its roots in Freudian, Reichian, and Jungian therapies as well as Eastern philosophies and shamanic practices." Quite, hence my concern! A concern articulated much more coherently in a critique of holotropic therapy made by Kevin Shepherd: "Dr. Grof is fond of making very brief references to a wide variety of mystical traditions like Sufism and Yoga, but is clearly unwilling to focus upon traditional conclusions as to the dangers of unprepared practitioners and inadequate teachers of mysticism."<sup>7</sup> Shepherd had also observed that, "The 'New Age' frequently revels in the glamour supplied by associations of Eastern mysticism, but finds it very convenient to neglect traditional Eastern mystical principles which warn that only a minority of highly prepared candidates can safely tackle intensifications of experience in this field, which will merely produce abnormalities in those

unprepared, or who follow inexpert teachers."<sup>8</sup> As to Freud, Reich, and Jung, I was sorry to be a dissenting heretic, but I felt that some of the theories of those revered icons were not entirely beyond dispute, Reichian permissiveness being a case in point.

Another critical view of Holotropic Breathwork came from Dr. Linda Watt. After studying accounts of breathwork, Dr. Watt, who practices at Leverndale psychiatric hospital in Glasgow, was reported by *The Scotsman*<sup>9</sup> as saying that "hyperventilation could cause seizure or lead to potential psychosis in vulnerable people," and added, "physiologically, hyperventilation is quite a dramatic thing for your body. Instructions to have buckets, towels and sick bowls around you because you could lose control of all your body functions is alarming; it's really quite masochistic." "Pillows to buffer kicking or pounding," and "plastic bags or buckets in case of nausea and vomiting."<sup>10</sup> were specified by Dr. Grof as indispensable items in a

room for holotropic breathwork. Not surprisingly, perhaps, when we are informed that, "among the reactions that might spontaneously occur... are violent shaking, grimacing, coughing, gagging, vomiting, a variety of movements, and a wide range of sounds that include screaming, baby talk, animal voices, talking in tongues or a language foreign to the client, shamanic chanting, and many others..."<sup>11</sup>

I knew full well at the time that Dr. Stanislav Grof is a highly acclaimed figure in the commercial world of transpersonal psychology,<sup>12</sup> but, to quote another critic again: "Because Dr. Grof is an M.D. is no reason to revere his prescriptions for 'self discovery,' but rather a reason to analyse his therapy with a due critical spirit."<sup>13</sup> The relevance of criticism was impressed upon me further through a non-critical article by Dr. David Mead, a practitioner of Holotropic Breathwork™, who described his own participation in this extreme therapy: "The music was powerful and I soon found myself running through a cold, grey, northern forest howling like a wolf - being a wolf. Then there was snarling and fighting with the facilitators and my sitter until I collapsed..."<sup>14</sup> Dr. Mead's hallucinogenic lycanthropic experience was no doubt applauded and classified under the rubric of shamanism<sup>15</sup> by breathwork partisans. Be that as it may, note that the snarling and fighting was not an hallucination.

The following year I, and others, decided to make public the issue of Holotropic Breathwork™, and also to seek the intervention of the then newly appointed Scottish Charities Office. It was an uphill struggle. Articles thankfully appeared in the local Press, and also *The Sunday Mail*, *The Scotsman*, and *The Guardian*. Finally, in 1993 the SCO commissioned an independent report from Edinburgh University on the effects of hyperventilation. The result: the Findhorn Foundation officially suspended all further sessions.<sup>16</sup> Unofficially, though, Holotropic Breathwork™ is still privately practised in the precinct of the Foundation - some Foundation members had spent considerable sums<sup>17</sup> with Grof Transpersonal Training Inc. to



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become practitioners, and required a profitable return for their investment.

As for Dr. Stanislav Grof, the last report I have concerning him was from an advertisement for a "retreat" in Switzerland titled: *Insight and Opening: The Power of the Breath and Meditation*. Dr. Grof had teamed up with a former Buddhist monk, Jack Kornfield, and Holotropic Breathwork™ combined with Insight Meditation (*Vipassana*) was now on offer to the public along with four-star hotel accommodation. For the sum of 1280 Swiss francs, that is. It seemed somewhat ironic to me that Kornfield had written a book with the subtitle: "A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life."

There is not space for more complete documentation,<sup>18</sup> nor indeed to examine Dr. Grof's theories in any detail,<sup>19</sup> theories which have been inspected at top professional level.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, I hope that the increasing rise of therapists and therapies that seek to commercially facilitate "an expanded mystical and spiritual dimension" in the lives of their clients, will arouse a due sense of criticism amongst readers of *The Therapist*. ■

#### REFERENCES:

1. Christina Grof was Muktananda's student until his death in 1982. Muktananda had gained a large American following, but it did not become widely known until the very end of his life that this professedly celibate Yogi regularly had sexual relations with young female "disciples." Other allegations include this Yogi's encouragement of terror tactics and financial deceits involving millions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts. See D. Anthony, B. Ecker, and K. Wilber, eds., *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), p. 22.
2. S. Grof, *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* (New York: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 292.
3. C. Grof and S. Grof, *The Stormy Search for the Self* (London: Mandala, 1991), p. 269.
4. S. Grof, *Beyond the Brain* (New York: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 388-9.
5. Statement by Ulla Sebastian, former professor of clinical psychology (*Rainbow Bridge*, May 1990). See also R. Storm, *In Search of Heaven on Earth* (London: Aquarian Press, 1992) p. 204, who notes that there have been complaints that the Findhorn Foundation "is becoming too worldly, that the sense of enlightenment has disappeared and that the accent is now on physical and entrepreneurial expansion rather than spiritual growth."
6. *Rainbow Bridge*, May 1990.
7. K. Shepherd, *Meaning in Anthropos* (Cambridge: Anthropographia Publications, 1991), p. xxxvii.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
9. "New Age meditation course cancelled on medical advice," *The Scotsman*, October 14th 1993.
10. *The Adventure of Self-Discovery*, p. 209.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
12. The term 'transpersonal psychology' was first coined by the psychedelic experimenter Stanislav Grof in the late 1960's.
13. Shepherd, *Meaning in Anthropos*, p. xlvi.
14. D. Mead, "Spiritual Traveller: Tales of Holotropic Breathing," *One Earth*, Issue no.4, Autumn 1991, p.38.
15. Alex Walker, a former Trustee of the Findhorn Foundation, states: "Stanislav Grof, the originator of this form of therapy, is adamant that it is a spiritual technique with an ancient shamanistic lineage." See A. Walker, ed., *The Kingdom Within* (Findhorn Press, 1994), p. 138. However, fellow transpersonal psychologist and psychedelic experimenter, Professor Ralph Metzner, is of a different opinion to that of Professor Grof: "The use of breathing techniques as a means to develop special states of consciousness is well documented in the yoga traditions, although its use in shamanism . . . is more uncertain." Prof Metzner concluded, "Breathing techniques have not, to my knowledge, been documented in shamanic traditions..." See R. Metzner, "Transformation Processes in Shamanism, Alchemy, and Yoga," in S. Nicholson, ed., *Shamanism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1987), p. 239. The use of yogic breathing techniques for acquiring "special states of consciousness" was not, however, advocated by Swami Prabhavananda, who warned: "There are instances in India, to my personal knowledge, of men who have become mentally unbalanced by such practices." Prabhavananda also observed: "Unfortunately an interest in breathing exercises that go by the name of yoga has been created in America by irresponsible authors and teachers." A concern further complicated by irresponsible professors, one might venture to add. See Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 1979), p. 253 n.1.
16. "Legal problems make the future of breathwork in the Community difficult to assess..." was a diminutive reference to the controversy made by Alex Walker in his non-critical "collection of writings about the history, work, beliefs and practices of the Findhorn Foundation" (*The Kingdom Within*, p. 138). Walker's understatement totally ignores the sociological background from which arose the legalities concerning the commercial practice and promotion of Holotropic Breathwork™ by a charitable educational trust. There was also no reference to the SCO's commissioned report on hyperventilation, which proves that the Foundation has no real concept of education, charitable or otherwise.
17. In a notice to the membership at the time of the introduction of Holotropic Breathwork™, the Director of the Findhorn Foundation (a breathwork trainee himself) estimated that the cost of the training would be £1,500 for members and £7,000 for associates, friends etc., excluding travel expenses." (*Rainbow Bridge*, April 1990).
18. See K. Thomas, *The Destiny Challenge* (Forres: New Frequency Press, 1992), chapter 14, for a first-hand account of life in the Findhorn Foundation at the time of the introduction of Holotropic Breathwork™.
19. I have been able to ascertain that a further, and more detailed, critique of Holotropic Breathwork™ will appear in K. Shepherd's forthcoming book *Minds and Sociocultures Vol. 1*, due to be published in 1998.<sup>21</sup>
20. In the report commissioned by the Scottish Charities Office, Professor Anthony Busuttil, Head of the Dept. of Forensic Pathology at Edinburgh University, has passed a negative verdict on the possible consequences of Holotropic Breathwork™ from a medical point of view that is surely relevant to the public interests.